

Vipassana Meditation: Healing the Healer

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Vipassana is an ancient meditation technique that is still practiced today, and that can help healing professionals themselves. As a practicing and teaching psychiatrist, I have been aided, through my practice of Vipassana, to deepen my autonomy and self knowledge at the same time that I have augmented my ability to be a professional anchor to others in the tumult of their lives. I have written about my experience and understanding of meditation in earlier chapters. Here I want to focus on the healers' healing: why nutritionists, chiropractors, yoga teachers, family practitioner physicians, psychologists and psychiatrists of my acquaintance have all been able to grow in their personal and professional lives while practicing Vipassana.

Vipassana touches the common ground of healing. It is acceptable and relevant to healers of diverse disciplines because it is free of dogma, experientially based, and focused on human suffering and relief. It contains the healing element from which the various molecules of our helping professions are built.

What, after all, must we do and be to heal ourselves, and to have energy to heal others? I believe the answer to this question is both obvious and universally acknowledged among healers of differing theoretical orientations.

We must see deeply into ourselves, our personal fears and prejudices and conventions and opinions, so that we may stand thoughtfully, clear-sightedly on reality. We must be able to differentiate the accidents of our birth, culture, and particular conditionings from the universal and the timeless truths.

We must live balanced, full lives, that sweep up the breadth and depth of what is potential in us as human beings; yet at the same time we must focus with discipline, determination, endurance, and continuity on what is central, essential, critical.

We must love, not just those who by accident or choice abut upon our lives, but love the potential for awakening that stirs within every life form, so that we can glimpse in the turmoil around us the possibility of an upward-reaching nature. We must accept, bow to, acknowledge that death will lead each of us, each of our patients away, but we must spark faith, hope for this next moment's luminosity in those who are pained, defeated, cynical, withered.

We must restrain our own lusts, impulses, needs, yet we must nourish ourselves so that self-containment does not culminate in dryness, but enables the fullness of the fountain of inner life.

We must walk the path from ignorance to knowledge, from doubt to clarity, from conviction to discovery. We must start anew every day, without accretions of doctrines and conclusions, like fledglings in the springtime of knowledge.

Vipassana is a way that a healer can ascend while carrying the burdens and demands of professional life.

Vipassana meditation was discovered twenty-five centuries ago by Gotama, the Buddha. In the language that he spoke, the meaning of the word Vipassana is insight, to see things as they really are. Although Vipassana contains the core of what later has been called Buddhism, it is not an organized religion, requires no conversion, and is open to students of any faith, nationality, color, or background. In its pure form, which can still be found and followed today, it is a non-sectarian art of living in harmony with the laws of nature. It is the ethical and social path that derives from an exploration of nature within the framework of one's own mind and body. Vipassana's goals are liberation from

suffering, and spiritual transcendence. It leads to inner peace, which those who practice it learn to share with others. Healing—not disease cure, but the essential healing of human suffering—is the purpose of Vipassana.

The passage of centuries obscured Vipassana in most of the countries to which it had originally spread, but in some lands it was preserved. In a few places the original practice of the Buddha in its hard simplicity was handed down in pure form from teacher to teacher across thousands of years. For centuries it remained unknown and unavailable to the West because of language and cultural barriers. Only recently, as Eastern Vipassana teachers themselves learned Western languages and ways, has the practice begun to spread around the world.

Credit for this is due to a Burmese layman, the late Sayagyi U Ba Khin, who was a master Vipassana teacher, and who also progressed in worldly affairs until he became Accountant General of newly independent Burma in 1947. U Ba Khin was familiar with British culture and language, and was free of ethnocentricity. He accepted as his disciple a Burmese-born Indian, S.N. Goenka, who has followed his teacher's tradition, and Buddha's tradition, of transcending the barriers of localized custom, sectarian religion, ethnic chauvinism, or other parochial affiliations. Through the work of Mr. Goenka and his assistant teachers in the past decade, Vipassana has spread worldwide.

Vipassana is taught in ten-day courses that require students to live in silence and full-time meditation. Each course is taught in an ambiance that duplicates and facilitates the goals of the practice. No conversation, reading, writing, radios, telephone calls, or other distractions are permitted. Students begin their course with vows to adhere to high moral values for the ten days: specifically to refrain from taking any life, to refrain from any intoxicants or sexual activity, to avoid lying or stealing. The students then progress for three and a half days through a preliminary, concentrative meditation which focuses on breath. From that they proceed to Vipassana proper: insight into the nature of the entire mind and body phenomenon. The ethical, restrained atmosphere and the concentrative background make six and a half days of silent practice of Vipassana in noble silence an intense, profound, often life-transforming experience.

Vipassana, as handed down from the Buddha through the chain of teachers to U Ba Khin and Mr. Goenka, has a unique feature among meditation practices, one that makes it particularly relevant to either somatically or psychologically oriented healers. It focuses on the absolute interconnection between mind and body. Through disciplined attention, students learn to observe directly within themselves that their bodies are constantly filled with myriad shifting sensations. These sensations in turn condition the mind. In fact, most mental life is a product of bodily life. If this last sentence sounds overstated, and you feel you are really your "mind" or "soul," try an experiment: chop off your head. Or, if that sounds extreme, instead try a Vipassana meditation course; it will take you on an observation-based, self-exploratory journey, to the common root of mind and body. A ten-day Vipassana experience will shatter your dualism, and replace it with a revolutionary vision of the unity of mind-body and its role in the unconscious origins of a sense of self.

During a ten-day meditation course, the unbroken atmosphere of hard work coupled to a supportive ambiance enables a flood of personal memories, hopes, and reveries to enter the student's consciousness for the first time. Along with awareness of this liberated flood of mental life, Vipassana also raises into consciousness awareness of an equally compelling stream of bodily sensations that constitute the physical level of life. The interconnection of these twin streams of becoming, mental and physical, lies at the root of our experience of ourselves. Every thought has sensations throughout the body connected to it. Every bodily sensation is related to thoughts. Usually, these two streams of life seem disconnected, autonomous, even at odds, because we haven't observed them systematically and carefully enough. Awareness of the psycho-somatic junction depends

upon unbroken, introverted concentration. Once we have established meditative mindfulness, we can observe directly the manner in which our thoughts become embodied.

Suffering springs from ignorance of our true nature. Insight, truth—experiential truth—frees us. The right path of life—not simply the path of one particular form of spirituality, but the path of all healing, including self-healing and other-healing, the path that points to the origin and elimination of suffering—becomes as clear as observations from a mountaintop.

Through Vipassana, we can see that we ourselves create the reality in which we live. Therefore within ourselves is the way, and the only way, out of suffering. What a person calls “self” is a mental-physical structure, an impersonal stream of transitory events, each one caused by the one before. Like any other natural phenomenon, we consist of a cloud of particles, a bundle of energy, responding to the scientific laws that run the universe. These scientific laws operate not only upon electrons, protons, and neutrons, but also upon our thoughts, feelings, judgments and sensations. At the subtlest level, our minds and bodies interconnect at the juncture where the physical arising and vanishing of the matter in our bodies is in contact with our minds. Events and thoughts that impinge upon our senses create changes in our somatic sensations. Our judgment of and reaction to this somatic sensory substrate form the mental-physical complexes we come to identify as ourselves. The constant mental reaction to somatic pain and pleasure conditions our unconscious definition of who and what we are.

The depth and power of our identification with the sensations of our bodies cannot be overestimated. I remember listening to a group of psychoanalysts discussing the Arab oil embargo in the early 1970s. At that time, long gas lines were forming, cars could hardly be used on weekends, and the availability of winter fuel oil was uncertain. The American way of life wasn't threatened—surely there was no danger to balanced judicial opinion, legislative government, freedom of thought, assembly, or press. Yet in the reaction of Americans, a terror and rage was provoked. The psychoanalysts standing in the medical school reception room schemed out loud how to augment their own ration of auto fuel, how to insure no disruption of their warmth and convenience. The note beneath their cocky self-assertion was—it seemed to me—terror. I thought to myself that these elder American healers may have been freed of oedipal problems by their psychoanalytic insight, but they remained prey to panicky dependence upon the somatic opulence of American society. Shortly after, the American president declared the Persian Gulf doctrine, which implied that America would risk nuclear holocaust of the earth if its oil supply were threatened. Consumptive fury-to-death underlies the behavior of leading healers and leading statesmen. The core of this fury is aversion to somatic sensations like cold, or the irritation of delay. Rather than feel them, we would risk toppling the whole tower of blocks. Each one of us who is honest will find a bit of this violently reactive petulance in him or herself.

Still, this represents only the macrobehavior associated with gross sensations like cold or hunger. What Vipassana reveals is an increasingly subtle level, where thousands of sensations are signaling throughout our bodies continuously. At the level of covert, unconscious thought behavior, we are continuously impelled to respond as if these biochemical clouds of molecular events in our bodies were ourselves. Vipassana meditation enables us to experience the deep vibratory substrate of unconscious mental clinging or aversion to physical events in the body, and to elevate these reactions into consciousness. Through this process, the meditator can transform primitive somatic self-identifications that might have led to suffering, into awareness and free choice.

Vipassana opens our two eyes: the eye of awareness of the root of our sense of self in bodily sensations, and the eye of equanimity; the capacity to observe a myriad of subtle

sensations, and their mental counterparts, without judgment or reaction, based on the realization that they are all ephemeral, transitory, not “self.” The new vision produced by the practice of awareness and equanimity results in graduation from the previously unconscious, gripping identification with somatic pleasure and pain. Vipassana is the path of transcendence of the pleasure principle.

A ten-day intensive Vipassana course is only the start of a long journey. Each person consists of an aggregation of countless thousands of conditioned emotional and behavioral reactions. Some are incidental, trivial. Some form significant complexes: rigid, stereotyped attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, conditioned by events and reactions in the past, that fire repetitively in fixed, historically conditioned patterns, in spite of the fact that life calls for thoughtful, specific, flexible responses. Modern Western psychotherapies are built upon the delineation, analysis, and elimination of these complexes. The psychotherapies are very similar to Vipassana in some of their methods and goals. Both enable healing through systematic self-awareness, self-knowledge, and freedom from past conditioning. Meditation and psychotherapy to some extent represent the convergence that is found throughout organic evolution: common problems which impel common solutions. Vipassana meditation differs from the psychotherapies, in its basis of specific ethical values, its particular cultivation of mindfulness of sensations, and its specification of a lifelong path evolving the transcendent. Healing is only one aspect of Vipassana, which is a broader approach to life itself.

Vipassana is not merely an exercise to be performed in the special environment of a meditation retreat. When a ten-day course is over, meditators take the tool home with them. The path of Vipassana is a continuous, disciplined pursuit of this experiential gnosis throughout life.

Although we imagine we are responding to people and events, we are actually responding to the covert fluxes of biophysical transformations triggered in us by those externals. Vipassana heals through ethical dedication, lifelong introspective discipline, self-knowledge and self-responsibility. Events are at best only partly under my control. My reactions, however, occur within the field of my physical life and self-identification, and ultimately are under my own control. I suffer not because of what has happened to me, but because I was unable to detach myself from the reactions to those events within my mind-body. Objectivity is freedom from suffering. Detachment from internal reactivity releases energy for giving. External fate may be imposed upon each of us, but psychological fate is a matter of consciousness and decision.

The path of Vipassana is a human capacity and a personal choice. It points towards a tranquil wisdom that transcends the automaticity of animal existence. Rather than reducing human life to a psycho-physical machine, this meditation exposes the ignorance of unconscious reactivity and releases the spirit of wisdom, virtue and illumination. The meditator becomes free to live for higher values, richer goals: loving kindness, sympathetic joy, compassion and peacefulness. Fear and yearning give way to choice, ardor, and faith in the human potential.

In this meditation practice, there is an embrace of whole life. No area is too trivial to explore. There is no blind faith, no divine intervention, no passive dependent pleading that will elevate us. Meditation practice is the vigorous and detailed pursuit of one's own wisdom. Vipassana makes us self-responsible, because it reveals, through self-observation, how we become our reactions and values. The path consists of making every thought in every moment a seed of equanimity that will bear the fruit of love and peace.

Healers will recognize in this aspect of the practice the basis for self-responsibility in symptom formation and symptom reversal. They will engage a worldview that is natural and scientific, free of dogmas or authoritarianism. They can enter a way that is the authentic transmission of the ancient East, time tested, genuine, validated across the

centuries by the actual practice and experience of millions of lives. Yet at the same time Vipassana is free of gurus, exotic costumes, or ethnocentric rituals. Instead of blind dependence on the teacher, Vipassana encourages respect and gratitude for the technique itself. Incidentally, there is no fee for the teaching. The ring of authenticity is confirmed as the students realize that U Ba Khin, S.N. Goenka, and all his assistants receive no payment for the teaching, which is handed on, person to person, on a charitable, spiritual basis. The teachers all earn their living elsewhere. The courses and centers where Vipassana is taught run on voluntary donations only.

The long silent hours of a Vipassana meditation course bring to the surface of the mind its previously repressed and hidden contents. The result is a deep exposure of one's personal history, one's inner life. The healer will find deepened self-knowledge as a result, and deeper empathy with the suffering of others. I know of no greater humanizer than exposure to our own life story in the unexpurgated edition. Another benefit for healers is greater respect for the multiplicity of healing modalities. Instead of needing to defend one's own discipline against others—psychiatry is right, acupuncture is wrong; chiropractic is right, yoga is wrong—one can appreciate how thought, feeling, judgment, choice and action are the common cause of suffering and the common way out. The walls of our own world are built by how we think, how we act, how we give. The healing modalities differ in where they intervene. They are efficacious to the extent that they operate on these core, universal variables. They are deceptive to the extent that they obscure one or more of these variables.

Thus nutrition that leads to social energy can be clearly differentiated from gluttony and epicureanism. Exercise that produces awareness and vitality can be clearly - differentiated from body building vanity or blind competitive aggression. Treatments that augment self-responsibility can be differentiated from those that foster dependency. Through Vipassana, we can transcend body-mind, or even East-West, dualism, and shake hands with ethical rootedness, cultivated mindfulness, and wisdom in all its enduring forms. Empathy, firmness, example, endurance, open mindedness, and a gateway to higher values are found in every worthwhile black bag.

II

In my professional work as a supervisor of psychiatrists-in-training and as a psychiatrist to other psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, physicians and health professionals, I have become acquainted with a syndrome that could be called "the wounded healer." The wounded healer functions as a high-quality professional. He or she is typically well-trained, diligent, self-educating, and reliably kind and knowledgeable in dealing with patients. But, inside, known only to themselves, and carefully concealed from others, the wounded healer feels alone, frightened, anxious, depressed. His or her professional attainments are genuine, and form excellent compensations for experiences of deprivation earlier in life. The wounded healer is typically an avoidant, proper, lonely person, who gives generously professionally in order to get the human contact of which he or she feels otherwise deprived. He or she is apt to hide deep feelings of hurt even from his or her spouse. The wounded healer permits him- or herself to become a patient only cautiously, sometimes waiting decades for the right healer to come along. As professionals themselves, they judge carefully. Their progress in psychotherapy is slow, because rather than having a single issue or focus, what they seek is the nurturing and sustained attention of therapy itself. They want cure less than they want participation, membership, an adoptive parent to heal and hold them as their original parents, for any one of various reasons, could not.

Originally, when I was first sought out by one or two established psychiatrists to be their psychiatrist, I was flattered by their estimation of me and I considered their problems in a purely individual light. Over the years, as the treatment of the wounded

professional has become my major activity, I have come to understand that the problem is not only individual. The wounded healer, I now believe, represents something essential at the core of healing. Freud and Jung insisted that analysts be analyzed. All people need healing, most particularly healers. The wounded healer will have his or her own unique constellation of individual and personal problems, but he or she also experiences the pain of pain. The very vulnerability and compassion that sets the healer on that lifelong journey, coupled to the constant exposure to human suffering, requires a treatment of its own. I have come to understand that the wounded healer is so cautious, circumspect and careful in selecting his or her own healer not merely out of pride, shame, professional scruples or trained judgment but also because he or she seeks personal healing that respects the previous truth of his or her own suffering. In the words of the Argentine potter and poet Antonio Porchia: "He who has seen everything empty itself is close to knowing what everything is filled with." A wounded healer's pain is not only a problem, but a valuable source of empathy and insights. It is the magnet that draws healers towards the fate of healing. The wounded healer brings to his or her healer not merely blind pain, but the kernel of noble suffering.

Noble suffering is human misery that drives towards insight, determination, release. It is the knowledge that suffering is existential. The deep note of noble suffering is what differentiates true healing from superficial patch-ups and fraudulent elixirs. The wounded healer is a person suffering from a deep, human, personal pain, who is able to perceive in his or her own plight the kernels of the universal truth about all pain and all plights, and who is accordingly sensitized to, and activated by, a lifelong calling to heal.

Noble suffering is the pathology beneath existential dismay which meditation dissects clearly into sight. It is the recognition that life is a gift, and pain.

Born with neurons, we will feel pain. Born with hearts, we will cry. The gift of life is conditional: only if we use it can we have it, and to use it means to realize that the pains and sorrows of existence are not merely circumstantial, but are intrinsic to tissue and to mind. Noble suffering is distress that serves as provocation to relinquish ourselves. Soon the trees, birds, schoolchildren and grandparents will be felt as crying out for your healing emanations that convey: "this hurting and inconstant self is not really you."

When I came to understand myself as a variant of the wounded healer, I appreciated Vipassana more deeply. Its age-old tradition of friendship and comradeship with all living things—squirrels, lakes, atmospheric presences, highschool teachers and writers—helped me feel surrounded by infinities of helpers for my own consternation, and recipients of my skills and affections. Oceans of beings swim with me, reach out to me, count on me to whisper inspiring exhortations in their ears.

Many contemporary psychotherapies and healings seem to me to be blindly organized around success, happiness, bourgeois attainment: two cars, two children, two houses, two wives, as if the whole world were invented in New Jersey and limited to the next twenty years. In Vipassana I had located a healing where my life wasn't organized around the opulence of my vacations or the applause and kudos I received. The path begins with the attitude that suffering can have a noble, enlightening function, and expands to incorporate new perspectives on time, space, our kinships beyond tactile immediacies.

In Vipassana, my birth and death on the shore of the mysterious ocean of the universe is a common bond to all beings. Vipassana is an ideal healing for healers, I believe, because it validates and affirms the direction given to life by conscious confrontation with the dismay that accompanies birth and death. Vipassana does not aim to palliate pain with comfort. Its goal is not health. Every person becomes sick and dies. The goal of Vipassana is the realization that the self is an illusory prison which leads to birth, death, suffering. The sense of a self is an illusion based upon the conditioning

exerted by somatic sensations upon the mind. Vipassana meditation brings into the open the existential link between sensations, self-concepts, and suffering, and permits a reawakening to the world beyond one's self. It operates at the common root where individual, isolated anguish opens out into the stream of undivided, selfless love. It heals by activating virtues that transcend self-success, self-pleasure, self-life. The meditator steps out into that which exists beyond the transient boundaries of body and mind.

Do I refer all my patients to Vipassana then? How—why—can I value and practice psychiatry? Vipassana meditation courses are not of interest to everyone. Some people may be too agitated or preoccupied to benefit—many kinds of help exist for many reasons. Some individuals may have preconceptions and prejudices that would keep them from meditating; others may have addictions or anxieties that would preclude their facing the removal from familiar environments that meditation courses require. Some simply rotate through hemispheres of different affinities. There can be no conversion, exhortation, arm twisting or imposition on this respectful and nonharmful path. The ten-day course is hard work. A lifetime on the path is rarer, harder work. It requires no exceptional intelligence, no athletic skill, no particular cultural background, but it does require character strength and a call.

Vipassana meditators who continue to walk the path for their lifetime come from all walks of life; of course, the vast majority are not themselves healers. Some are illiterate, some poor, some old, some crippled, some physically ill. Indian peasant farmers, German sociologists, Australian carpenters and French psychotherapists practice this way of life. Like the image of Noah's ark, every kind is represented. But there are some requirements, though they tend to be intangible.

Meditators must "have the seed." Like the life of any seed, the seed of meditation eludes the microscope of words: Is it basic good faith; or a sense of determination; or enough miseries and losses to have to keep going; or an unfathomable curiosity about their own true nature; or an intuition of values that transcend immediate life; or a yearning for peace; or a recognition of the limitations of mundane routines? It was said by the Buddha that at the heart of the path lies *ahimsa*, non-harmfulness. Is it an inkling of the infinite curative value that this most treasured and elusive cumulative virtue provides, that constitutes the seed? In any case, a life of meditation is a path for those who hear the call, seek it out, and sit down to observe. Some may not seek it, some may not value it, some may not tolerate it, some may have other valuable paths to take.

The French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, wrote, "Psychoanalysis may accompany the patient to the ecstatic limit of the 'thou art that,' in which is revealed to him the cipher of his mortal destiny, but it is not in our mere power as practitioners to bring him to that point where the real journey begins." Vipassana meditation is based on one thing: "This is suffering; this is the way out of suffering." It is the path where the real journey begins. It is a healing by observation of and participation in the laws of nature. Even the stars are born and die, but beyond the transiency of the world there is an eternal that each of us can travel towards. Vipassana heals by focusing onto particular pain the invisible spectrum of the universal.

1990